EDITORIAL, FINANCIAL AND AUTOMOBILES.

New York Tribune

EDITORIAL, FINANCIAL AND AUTOMOBILES.

PART III. EGHT PAGES. SUNDAY, MAY 14, 1916. PART III. EIGHT PAGES.

THE PROMISED LAND---LORRAINE'S FORGOTTEN BATTLE

One of the Greatest Struggles of the War—German High Tide Before Nancy—A Shell-Torn Field of 10,000 Dead.

By FRANK H. SIMONDS,
Author of "The Great War."

In the third week of August, 1914, a French army crossed the frontier of Alsace-Lorraine and entered the Promised Land, toward which all Frenchmen had looked in hope and sadness for forty-four years. The long-forgotten communiqués of that early period of the war reported success after success, until at last it was announced that the victorious French armies had reached Sarrebourg and Morhange, and were astride the Strassburg-Metz Railroad. And then Berlin took up the cry, and France and the world learned of a great German victory and of the defeat and rout of the invading army. Even Paris conceded that the retreat had begun, and the "army of liberation" was crowding back beyond the frontier and far within French territory.

Then the curtain of the censorship fell, and the world turned to the westward to watch the terrible battle for Paris. In the agony and glory of the Marne the struggle along the Moselle was forgotten; the Battle of Nancy, of Lorraine, was fought and won in the darkness, and when the safety of Paris was assured the world looked toward the Aisne, and then toward Flanders. So it came about that one of the greatest battles of the whole war, one of the most important of the French victories, the success that made the Marne possible, the rally and stand of the French armies about Nancy, escaped the fame it earned. Only in legend, in the romance of the Kaiser with his cavalry waiting on the hills to enter the Lorraine capital, did the battle live.

A Much-Studied Battlefield.

When I went to France one of the hopes I had cherished was that I might be permitted to visit this battlefield, to see the ground on which a great battle had been fought that was still unknown country, in the main, for those who have written on the war. The Lorraine field was the field on which France and Germany had planned for a generation to fight. Had the Germans respected the neutrality of Belgium, it is by Nancy, by the gap between the Vosges and the hills of the Meuse, that they must have broken into France. The Marne was a battlefield which was reached by chance and fought over by hazard, but every foot of the Lorraine country had been studied for the fight long years in advance. Here war followed the natural course, followed the plans of the General Staff prepared years in advance. Indeed, I had treasured over years a plan of the Battle of Nancy, contained in a French book written years ago, which might serve as the basis for a history of what happened, as it was written as a prophecy of what was to come.

When the Great General Staff was pleased to grant my request to see the battlefield of Nancy I was advised to travel by train to that town, accompanied by an officer from the General Staff, and informed that I should there meet an officer of the garrison, who would conduct me to all the points of interest and explain in detail the various phases of the conflict. Thus it fell out, and I have to thank Commandant Leroux for the courtesy and consideration which made this excursion successful.

The Old and the New Lines.

In peace time one goes from Paris to Nancy in five hours, and the distance is about that from New York to Boston, by Springfield. In war all is different, and the time almost doubled. Yet there are compensations. Think of the New York-Boston trip as bringing you beyond New Haven to the exact rear of battle, of battle but fifteen miles away, with the guns booming in the distance and the aeroplanes and balloons in full view. Think also of this same trip, which from Hartford to Worcester follows the line of a battle not yet two years old, a battle that has left its traces in ruined villages, in shattered houses. On either side of the railroad track the graves descend to meet the embankments; you can mark the advance and the retreat by the crosses which fill the fields. The gardens that touch the railroad and extend to the rear of houses in the little towns are filled with graves. Each enclosure has been fought for at the point of the bayonet, and every garden wall recalls the Château of Hougomont, at Waterloo.

All this was two years ago, but there is to-day also. East of Bar-le-Duc the main line is cut by German shell fire now. From Fort Camp des Romains above St. Mihiel German guns sweep the railroad near Commercy, and one has to turn south by a long detour, as if one went to Boston by Fitchburg, travel south through the country of Jeanne d'Arc and return by Toul, whose forts look out upon the invaded land. Thus one comes to Nancy by night, and only by night, for twenty miles beyond there are Germans and a German cannon which not so long ago sent a shell into the town and removed a whole city block beside the railroad station. It is the sight of this ruin as you enter the town which reminds you that you are at the front, but there are other reminders.

As we ate our dinner in the café facing the beautiful Place Stanislas we were disturbed by a strange and curious drumming sound. Going out into the square, we saw an aeroplane, or rather its lights, red and green, like those of a ship. It was the first of several, the night patrol, rising slowly and steadily, and then sweeping off in a wide curve toward the enemy's line. They were the sentries of the air which were to guard us while we slept, for men do sentry-go in the air as well as on the earth about the capital of Lorraine. Then the searchlights on the hills began to play, sweeping the horizon toward that same mysterious region where beyond the darkness there is war.

Only a Taube.

The next morning I woke with the sense of Fourth of July. Bang! Bang! Bang! Such a barking of cannon crackers I had never heard. Still drowsy, I pushed open the French windows and looked down on the square. There I beheld a hundred or more men, women and children, their eyes fixed on something in the air above and behind the hotel. Still the incessant barking of guns, with the occasional boom of something more impressive. With difficulty I grasped the fact. I was in the midst of a Taube raid. Somewhere over my head, invisible to me because of the wall of my hotel, a German aeroplane was flying, and all the anti-air craft guns were shooting at it. Was it carrying bombs? Should I presently see or feel the destruction following the descent of these?

But the Taube turned away, the guns fired less and less frequently, the people in the streets drifted away, the children to school, the men to work, the women to wait. It was just a detail in their lives, as familiar as the incoming steamer to the commuters on the North River ferryboats. Some portion of war has been the day's history of Nancy for nearly two years now. The children do not carry gas masks to school with them as they do at Pont-à-Mousson, a dozen miles to the north, but women and children have been killed by German shells, by bombs, brought by Zeppelins and by aeroplanes. There is always excitement of sorts in the district of Nancy.

Where German Violence Broke.

After a breakfast broken by the return of the aeroplanes we had seen departing the night before for the patrol we entered our cars and set out for the front, for the near-front, for the lines a few miles behind the present trenches, where Nancy was saved but two years ago. Our route lay north along the valley of the Meurthe, a smiling, broad valley, marching north and south and meeting in a few miles that of the Moselle coming east. It was easy to believe that one was riding through the valley of the Susquehanna, with spring and peace in the air. Toward the east a wall of hills shut out the view. This was the shoulder of the Grand Couronné, the wall against which German violence burst and broke in September, 1914.

Presently we came to a long stretch of road walled in on the river side by brown canvas, exactly the sort of thing that is used at football games to shut out the non-paying public. But it had another purpose here. We were within the vision of the Germans, across the river, on the heights, behind the forest, which outlined itself at the skyline; there were the Kaiser's troops and that forest was the Bois-le-Prêtre, the familiar incident in so many communiqués since the war began. Thanks to the canvas, it was possible for the French to move troops along this road without inviting German shells. Yet it was impossible to derive any large feeling of security from a canvas wall, which alone interposed between you and German heavy artillery.

"War—Do Not Trespass."

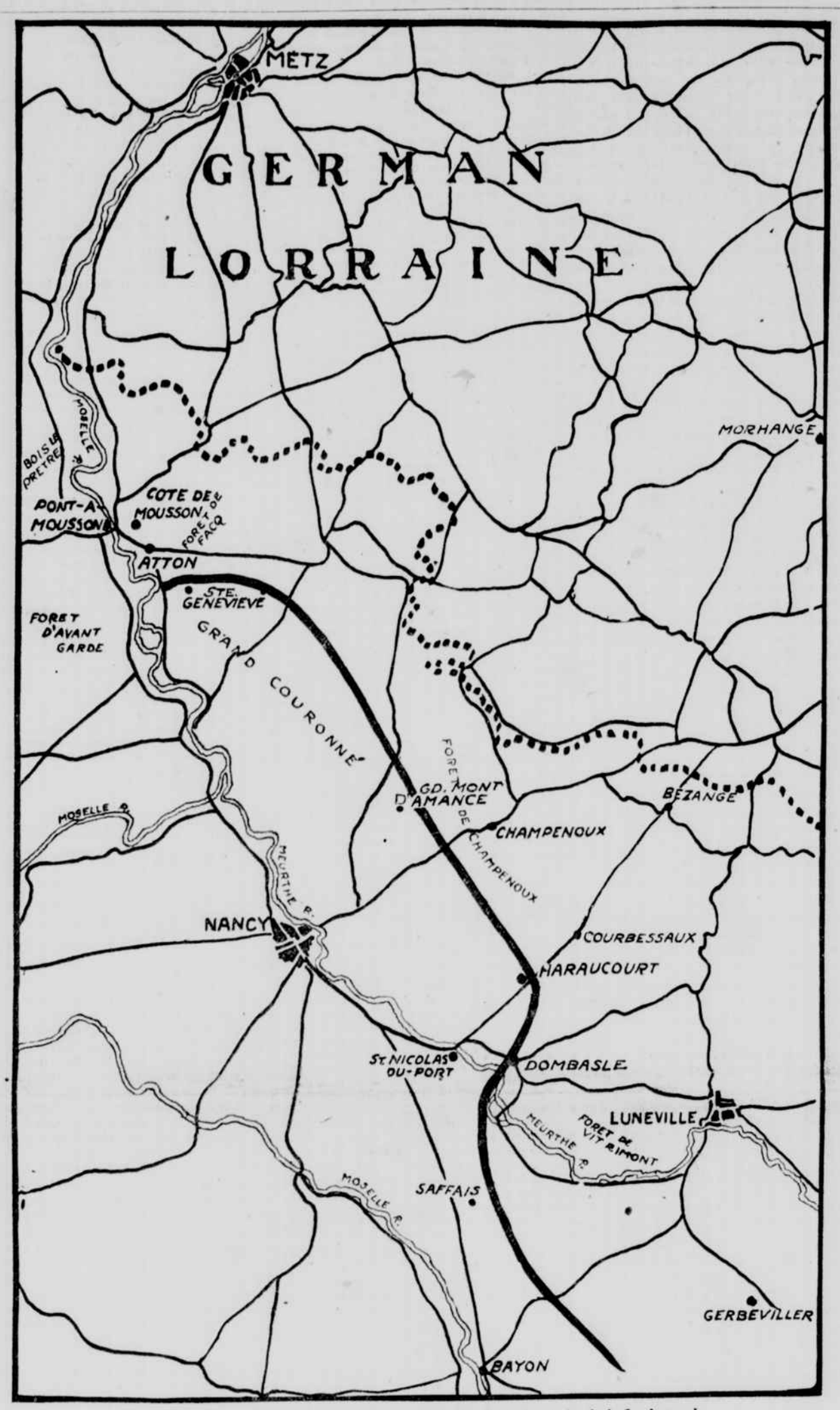
We passed through several villages, and each was crowded with troops; cavalry, infantry, all the branches were represented; it was still early and the soldiers were just beginning their day's work; war is so completely a business here. Transport wagons marched along the roads; companies of soldiers filed by. Interspersed with the soldiers were the civilians, the women and children, for none of the villages is evacuated. Not even the occasional boom of a gun far off could give to this thing the character of real war. It recalled the days of my soldiering in the militia camp at Framingham in Massachusetts. It was simply impossible to believe that it was real. Even the faces of the soldiers were smiling. There was no such sense of terribleness, of strain and weariness as I later found about Verdun. The Lorraine front is now inactive, tranquil; it has been quiet so long that men have forgotten all the carnage and horror of the earlier time.

We turned out of the valley and climbed abruptly up the hillside. In a moment we came into the centre of a tiny village and looked into a row of houses whose roofs had been swept off by shell fire. Here and there a whole house was gone; next door the house was undisturbed and the women and children looked out of the doors. The village was Ste. Geneviève, and we were at the extreme front of the French in August, and against this hill burst the flood of German invasion. Leaving the car, we walked out of the village, and at the end of the street a sign warned the wayfarer not to enter the fields for which we were bound: "War—do not trespass." This was the burden of the warning.

Once beyond this sign we came out suddenly upon an open plateau, upon trenches. Northward the slope descended to a valley at our feet. It was cut and seamed by trenches, and beyond the trenches stood the posts that carried the barbed wire entanglements. Here and there, amidst the trenches, there were graves. I went down to the barbed wire entanglements and examined them curiously. They at least were real. Once thousands of men had come up out of the little woods a quarter of a mile below; they had come on in that famous massed attack, they had come on in the face of machine guns and "seventy-fives." They had just reached the wires, which marked high water. In the woods below, the Bois-de-Facq, in the fields by the river, 4,000 Germans had been buried.

Forest of the Advance Guard.

Looking out from the trenches, the whole country unfolded. Northward the little village of Atton slept under the steep slope of Côte-de-Mousson, a round pinnacle crowned with an ancient chateau. From the hill the German artillery had swept the ground where I stood. Below the hill to the west was Pont-à-Mousson, the city of 150 bombardments, which the Germans took when they came south and lost later. Above it was the Bois-le-Prêtre, in which guns were now booming occasionally. Far to the north was another hill, just visible, and its slope toward us was cut and seamed, with yellow slashes: those were the French trenches, then of the second or third line; beyond there was still another hill; it was slightly blurred in the haze, but it was not over five miles away, and it was occupied by the Germans. From the slope above me on a clear day it is possible to see Metz, so near are French and German lines to the old frontier.



The dark line shows the position on which the French made their final stand.

Straight across the river to the west of us was another wood, with a glorious name, the Forest of the Advance Guard. It swept to the south of us. In that wood the Germans had also planted their guns on the day of battle. They had swept the trenches where I stood from three sides. Plainly it had been a warm corner. But the French had held on. Their commander had received a verbal order to retreat. He insisted that it should be put in writing, and this took time. The order came. It had to be obeyed, but he obeyed slowly. Reluctantly the men left the trenches they had held so long. They slipped southward along the road by which we had just come. But suddenly their rear guards discovered the Germans were also retreating. So the French came back, and the line of Ste. Geneviève was held, the northern door to Nancy was not forced.

Looking down again, it was not difficult to reconstitute that German assault, made at night. The thing was so simple the civilian could grasp it. A road ran through the valley, and along it the Germans had formed; the slope they had to advance up was gentle, far more gradual than that of San Juan. They had been picked troops selected for a forlorn hope, and they had come back four times. The next morning the whole forest had been filled with dead and dying. Not less than a division—20,000 men—had made the terrible venture. Now there was a strange sense of emptiness in the country; war had come and gone, left its graves, its trenches, its barbed wire entanglements; but these were all disappearing already. On this beautiful spring morning it was impossible to feel the reality of what had happened here, what was happening now, in some measure, five miles or more to the north. Nature is certainly the greatest of all pacifists; she will not permit the signs of war to endure nor the mind to believe that war itself has existed and exists.

The Promised Land.

From Ste. Geneviève we went to the Grand Mont d'Amance, the most famous point in all the Lorraine front, the southeast corner of the Grand Couronné, as Ste. Geneviève is the northern. Here, from a hill some 1,300 feet high, one looks eastward into the Promised Land of France—into German Lorraine. In the early days of August the great French invasion, resting one flank upon this hill, the other upon the distant Vosges, had stepped over the frontier. One could trace its route to the distant hills among which it had found disaster. In those hills the Germans had hidden their heavy guns, and the French, coming under their fire without warning, unsupported by heavy artillery, which was lacking to them, had broken. Then the German invasion had rolled back. You could follow the route. In the foreground the little Seille River could be discerned; it marked the old frontier. Across this had come the defeated troops. They had swarmed down the low, bare hills; they had crossed and vanished in the woods just at my feet; these woods were the Forest of Champenoux. Into this forest the Germans had followed by the thousands; they were astride the main road to Nancy, which rolled white and straight at my feet. But in the woods the French rallied. For days there was fought in this stretch of trees one of the most terrible of battles.

As I stood on the Grand Mont I faced almost due east. In front of me and to the south extended the forest. Exactly at my feet the forest reached up the hill and there was a little cluster of buildings about a fountain. All was in ruins, and here, exactly here, was the high water mark of the German advance. They had occupied the ruins for a few moments and then had been driven out. Elsewhere they had never emerged from the woods; they had approached the western shore, but the French had met them with machine guns and "seventy-fives." The brown woods at my feet were nothing but a vast cemetery; thousands of French and German soldiers slept there.

In their turn the Germans had gone back. Now, in the same woods, a French battery was shelling the Germans on the other side of the Seille. Under the glass I studied the little villages unfolding as on a map; they were all destroyed, but it was impossible to recognize this. Some were French, some German; you could follow the line, but there were no trenches; behind them French shells were bursting occasionally and black smoke rose just above the ground. Thousands of men faced each other less than four miles from where I stood, but all that there was to be detected were the shell-bursts; otherwise one saw a pleasant country, rolling hills, mostly without woods, bare in the spring, which had not yet come to turn them green. In the foreground ran that arbitrary line Bismarck had drawn between Frenchmen forty-six years before—the frontier—but of natural separation there was none. He had cut off a part of France, that was all, and one looked upon what had been and was still a bleeding wound.

Where the Kaiser Waited for a Triumphal Entrance—And the French Wait for Metz and Strassburg.

The Kaiser Waited.

I asked the French commandant about the various descriptions made by those who have written about the war. They have described the German attack as mounting the slope of the Grand Mont, where we stood. He took me to the edge and pointed down. It was a cliff almost as steep as the Palisades. "C'est une blague," he smiled. "Just a story." The Germans had not charged here, but in the forest below, where the Nancy road passes through and enters the valley of the Amezeule. They had not tried to carry but to turn the Grand Mont. More than 200,000 men had fought for days in the valley below. I asked him about the legend of the Kaiser, sitting on a hill, waiting in white uniform with his famous escort, waiting until the road was clear for his triumphal entrance into the capital of Lorraine. He laughed. I might choose my hill; if the Emperor had done this thing the hill was "over there," but had he? They are hard on legends at the front, and the tales that delight Paris die easily on the frontiers of war.

But since I had asked so much about the fighting my commandant promised to take me in the afternoon to the point where the struggle had been fiercest, still further to the south, where all the hills break down and there is a natural gateway from Germany into France, the beginning of the famous Charmes Gap, through which the German road to Paris from the east ran, and still runs. Leaving Nancy behind us, and ascending the Meurthe valley on the eastern bank, turning out of it before St. Nicolas du Port, we came presently to the most completely war-swept fields that I have ever seen. On a perfectly level plain the little town of Haraucourt stands in sombre ruins. Its houses are nothing but ashes and rubble. Go out of the village toward the east, and you enter fields pockmarked by shell fire. For several miles you can walk from shell hole to shell hole. The whole country is a patchwork of these shell holes. At every few rods a new line of old trenches approaches the road and wanders away again. Barbed wire entanglements run up and down the gently sloping hillsides.

A Field of 10,000 Dead.

Presently we came out upon a perfectly level field. It was simply torn by shell fire. Old half-filled trenches wandered aimlessly about, and beyond, under a gentle slope, the little village of Courbessaux stood in ruins. The commandant called my attention to a bit of woods in front.

"The Germans had their machine guns there," said he. "We didn't know it, and a French brigade charged across this field. It started at 8:15, and at 8:30 it had lost more than 3,000 out of 6,000. Then the Germans came out of the woods in their turn, and our artillery, back at Haraucourt, caught them, and they lost 3,500 men in a quarter of an hour." Along the roadside were innumerable graves. We looked at one. It was marked: "Here 179 French." Twenty feet distant was another; it was marked: "Here 196 Germans." In the field where we stood I was told some 10,000 men are buried. They were buried hurriedly, and even now when it rains arms and legs are exposed.

Two years had passed, almost two years, since this field had been fought for. The Germans had taken it. They had approached Haraucourt, but had not passed it. This was the centre and the most vital point in the Lorraine battle. What Foch's troops had done about La Fère Champenoise those of Castelnau had done here. The German wave had been broken, but at what cost! And now, after so many months, the desolation of war remained. But yet it was not to endure. Beside these very graves an old peasant was ploughing, guiding his plough and his horses carefully among the tombs. Four miles away more trenches faced each other and the battle went on audibly, but behind this line, in this very field where so many had died, life was beginning.

The Most Wrecked Town of France.

Later we drove south, passing within the lines the Germans had held in their great advance; we travelled through Lunéville, which they had taken and left unharmed, save as shell fire had wrecked an eastern suburb. We visited Gerbéviller, where in an excess of rage the Germans had burned every structure in the town. I have never seen such a headquarters of desolation. Everything that had a shape, that had a semblance of beauty or of use, lies in complete ruin—detached houses, a château, the blocks in the village, all in ashes. Save for Sermaize, Gerbéviller is the most completely wrecked town in France.

You enter the village over a little bridge across the tiny Mortagne. Here some French soldiers made a stand and held off the German advance for some hours. There was no other battle at Gerbéviller, but for this defence the town died. Never was death so complete. Incendiary material was placed in every house, and all that thoroughness could do to make the destruction complete was done. Gerbéviller is dead; a few women and children live amidst its ashes; there is a wooden barrack by the bridge, with a postoffice and the inevitable postcards, but only on postcards, picture postcards, does the town live. It will be a place of pilgrimage when peace comes.

From Gerbéviller we went by Bayon to the Plateau of Saffais, the ridge between the Meurthe and the Moselle where the defeated army of Castelnau made its last and successful stand. The French line came south from Ste. Geneviève, where we had been in the morning, through the Grand Mont, across the plain by Haraucourt and Courbessaux, then crossed the Meurthe by Dombasle and stood on the heights from Rossières south. Having taken Lunéville, the Germans attempted to cross the Meurthe coming out of the Forest of Vitrimont.

A Routed Army Finds Itself.

Standing on the Plateau of Saffais and facing east, the whole country unfolded again, as it did at the Grand Mont. The face of the plateau is seamed with trenches. They follow the slopes, and the village of Saffais stands out like a promontory. On this ridge the French had massed three hundred cannon. Their army had come back in ruins, and to steady it they had been compelled to draw troops from Alsace. Mülhausen was sacrificed to save Nancy. Behind these crests on which we stood a beaten army, almost routed, had in three days found itself and returned to the charge.

In the shadow of the dusk I looked across the Meurthe into the brown mass of the Forest of Vitrimont. Through this had come the victorious Germans. They had debouched from the wood; they had approached the river, hidden under the slope, but, swept by the hell of this artillery storm, they had broken. But few had lived to pass the river; none had mounted the slopes. There were almost no graves along these trenches. Afterward the Germans had in turn yielded to pressure from the south and gone back. Before the Battle of the Marne began the German wave of invasion had been stopped here in the last days of August. A second terrific drive, coincident with the Marne, had likewise failed. Then the Germans had gone back to the frontier. The old boundary line of Bismarck is now in many instances an actual line of fire, and nowhere on this front are the Germans more than three or four miles within French territory.

If you should look at the map of the whole imaginary Battle of Nancy drawn by Colonel Boucher to illustrate his book, published before 1910, a book describing the problem of the defence of the eastern frontier, you will find the lines on which the French stood at Saffais indicated exactly. Colonel Boucher had not dreamed this battle, but for a generation the French General Staff had planned it. Here they had expected to meet the German thrust. When the Germans decided to go by Belgium they had in turn taken the offensive, but, having failed, they had fought their long planned battle.

A City Waiting.

Out of all the region of war, of war to-day and war yesterday, one goes back to Nancy, to its busy streets, its crowds of people returning from their day's work. War is less than fifteen miles away, but Nancy is as calm as London is nervous. Its bakers still make macaroons; even Taube raids do not excuse the children from punctual attendance at school. Nancy is calm with the calmness of all France, but with just a touch of something more than calmness, which forty-six years of living by an open frontier brings. Twenty-one months ago it was the gage of battle, and half a million men fought for it; a new German drive may approach it at any time. Out toward the old frontier there is still a German gun, hidden in the Forest of Bézange, which has turned one block to ashes and may fire again at any hour. Zeppelins have come and gone, leaving dead women and children behind them, but Nancy goes on with to-day.

And to-morrow? In the hearts of all the people of this beautiful city there is a single and a simple faith. Nancy turns her face toward the ancient frontier; she looks hopefully out upon the shell swept Grand Couronne and beyond to the Promised Land. And the people say to you, if you ask them about war and about peace, as one of them said to me: "Peace will come, but not until we have our ancient frontier, not until we have Metz and Strassburg. We have waited a long time, is it not so?"